

CONSERVATION OF AUSTRALIA'S HISTORIC HERITAGE PLACES

SUBMISSION

By

HEATHER BERRY

My husband and I have owned and lived in a State Listed Heritage Item for 25 years. The property is situated in a rural zone and comprises the homestead, stables and other small outbuildings. The property is located on 60 acres adjacent to the residential areas of an expanding regional centre.

I submit the following points for consideration:

The owner as the Enemy

The NSW Heritage Act

The NSW Heritage Act appears only to concern itself with the neglect or damage to a heritage item where it is caused by the owner, with punitive penalties including fines of up to one million dollars or six months imprisonment for an offence against the Act. From our experience most private heritage owners are dedicated to the preservation of their buildings. The Heritage Act appears to cast the owner as the enemy and fails to provide private owners with any much needed support.

The Heritage Council and Heritage Office

The role of both the Heritage Council and the Heritage Office is confined to protecting heritage from the actions of the owner. When we were faced with an amenity issue our attempts to obtain assistance from both bodies have brought little result quite obviously because these bodies have no legal power other than that vested under the Heritage Act. The Heritage Office could not even recommend to us an environmental lawyer.

Incentives

Heritage owners need some decent incentives to assist them in preservation. The offer of reduced council rates or rebates on land tax provides little or no incentive to owners. If you are a private owner then it is more than likely that the building is your principle place of residence and therefore does not attract land tax in the first place. Council rates rebates are so small as to be of no assistance.

What we need is some major source of funds particularly for those major repair jobs which are becoming more frequent and expensive as the buildings age.

Lead by Example

In NSW the State Government is neglecting its own listed heritage buildings. If the government cannot find the funds to preserve the state's heritage in its ownership then how can private individuals be expected to? (eg Graythwaite, North Sydney)

Borrowing Money

From our experience many lending institutions will not lend money on a rural property, particularly if it is on acreage. Many lending institutions will not lend on heritage buildings.

Insurance

Many insurance companies will not insure heritage listed buildings. We can no longer afford public liability insurance so that we can open for Heritage Week or the occasional coach tour.

Tourism

The return from tourism is minimal and would not even cover our wages let alone provide sufficient returns to fund heritage restoration work. From our experience tour operators do not want to pay more than about \$4 per head for a tour - this amounts to around \$150 per coach tour. Preparation and clearing up after a tour meant that we were earning less than \$5 per hour. Some tours also wanted an afternoon tea and we served this for around \$3 per head - this barely covered the cost of the ingredients.

Tradesmen

In the country it is difficult to find tradesmen skilled in heritage work. We live close to advancing residential development that provides ample building work and for most tradesmen heritage work is demanding and requires greater skill. There is the option of bringing tradesmen from Sydney but as there are travel costs and accommodation expenses to add on top of the hourly rate it becomes prohibitively expensive.

Cost of Development

Any work, other than minor maintenance on a heritage item may require the submission of a development application. This in turn may require the production of a Conservation Management Plan, a Conservation Policy or a Statement of Heritage Impact, all of which would generally require the input of a heritage expert. This adds significantly to the cost of the work to be carried out and no doubt deters most tradesmen from even wanting to quote on the job.

Use by Date

Many heritage buildings are now well over 100 years old and are beginning to suffer from old age. As an example our home needs the whole roof restated and this will be a major cost. This is not a problem caused by neglect but purely one of age. As a majority of heritage buildings are in a similar age bracket they will all start to need a major injection of funds in the near future.

The older a building becomes the more the fabric deteriorates and the more funds are required to ensure its preservation.

LEP Model Heritage Provisions

Clause 37 in the LEP can be used to benefit a heritage owner. This clause offers owners the possibility of being able to carry out non-complying development if it can be shown to be necessary for the preservation of the heritage item. New Model Rules in NSW now propose to restrict the scope of this provision to the detriment of heritage owners.

Economic Factors

For city dwellers it is probably hard to believe that there is such a thing as depreciating real estate. In the country property values are much lower than in the city and you cannot rely on significant capital appreciation. To maintain a heritage item may mean putting far more money into that item than you can ever expect to see returned. Once you are outside the Sydney market a heritage item can easily become real estate poison.

Summing Up

Having had contact with many private owners of heritage buildings I would like to point out that most of them are doing Australia a great service. Many of us are spending most of our spare time and money preserving Australia's heritage at no cost to the community as a whole. Our dedication and labours all too often go unrecognised and yet we are making a substantial contribution to the conservation of the nation's heritage.

Whilst the attitude of Government and the Not For Profit Organisations appears to be hardening towards private owners our problems are becoming more and more difficult. What was once seen as a pleasure is rapidly becoming a burden.

Government and heritage bodies must realise that they too have a duty of care towards the many private heritage owners who are dedicating their lives to the preservation of Australia's heritage.